

Access to marriage for same sex couples would constitute positive social change

Apr 4 2012

*Research shows that the legal recognition of same sex relationships is viewed as a highly important equality issue for lesbians, gay men and others living in same sex relationships. **Elizabeth Peel** argues that the longer this structural inequality exists, the more heterosexism in the media and in our society will damage our communities.*



The Government launched its 12-week consultation on 'equal civil marriage' for same sex couples in England and Wales this month in the face of vociferous opposition from Catholic clergy. It is fair to say that lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) people have a complicated relationship with marriage and marriage-like institutions for many reasons, not least because of exclusivity of this form of relationship recognition and its traditional subjugation of women. Historically – and currently in some of the world – people who live outside of the normative heterosexual relationship framework are excluded from social recognition of their relationships and subjected to vilification and prejudice. Times change and yet, as we have seen in the present media debate about 'gay marriage' in England and Wales, homophobia and heterosexism endure.

Ironically, when the previous Labour Government introduced Civil Partnership (a marriage-like legal framework for same sex couples) in December 2005, it was widely reported in the British print media as same sex marriage. Around the time that the Civil Partnership Act (2004) became available there were three main, and contradictory, themes in the national newspaper coverage. First was that 'same-sex marriage becomes legal under the Civil Partnership Act'; second that 'couples will not get full legal status'; and finally, that 'marriage is a heterosexual business'.

What is interesting about media debates about same sex relationships is that they are pitted against different sex relationships and, invariably, a heavy freight is placed on the ways in which we organise our lives. There is little cultural space to celebrate the wonderful blessing it is for children to be raised by loving mothers, for example. The significant air time that religiously-justified prejudice is given underscores the societal entrenchment of the normative debate between pro- and anti-same sex marriage both within and outside LGBTQ communities.

Do lesbian, gay and bisexual people want marriage?

The simple answer to the question of whether gay and lesbians want to marry is yes and no. LGBTQ communities are as diverse and wide-ranging in terms of personal choices, political and religious views as the heterosexual community. Inevitably the Government will receive assenting and critical feedback on their 'equal civil marriage' consultation hailing from within, as well as outside, so-called sexual minority groups. The devil is in the detail of course. But ideological framing aside, access to marriage for same sex couples constitutes positive social change.

My own research with Dr Rosie Harding from Keele University suggests that the legal recognition of same sex relationships is viewed as a highly important equality issue for lesbians, gay men and others living in same sex relationships. Our large scale online survey research assessed views regarding same sex marriage and civil partnership from 27 different countries .

Most respondents identified as lesbian or gay (69.4%) and were currently in a same

Table 1: Country of residence (n = 1494) from Harding and Peel (2006)

Country	Number	Percent
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sex relationship (67.2%).

Australia	428	28.6%
Canada	422	28.2%
USA	294	19.7%
UK	220	14.7%
Finland	80	5.4%
Singapore	9	0.6%
New Zealand	9	0.6%
Estonia	5	0.3%
Thailand	3	0.2%
South Africa	3	0.2%
The Netherlands	3	0.2%
Ireland	2	0.1%
Spain	2	0.1%

Table 2: Same sex relationship status (n=1509) from Harding and Peel (2006)

In same sex Relationship	Sexuality: % (n)					
	Lesbian	Gay	Bisexual	Heterosexual	Other	All Sexualities
Yes	89.5% (513)	77.4% (367)	46% (81)	8.3% (19)	60.7% (34)	67.2% (1014)
No	10.5% (60)	22.6% (107)	54% (95)	91.7% (211)	39.3% (22)	32.8% (495)

Our findings highlighted that while lesbian, gay and bisexual people strongly support the legal recognition of same sex relationships they are especially in favour of same sex marriage, and believe that all individuals (regardless of their sexuality) should have access to the same relationship choices and statuses.

Table 3: Would you marry? (n=1290) from Harding and Peel (2006)

Marry?	Sexuality % (n)					
	Lesbian	Gay	Bisexual	Heterosexual	Other	All Sexualities
Yes	73.6% (382)	63.3% (257)	60.5% (89)	68.2% (118)	66.7% (30)	67.9% (876)
No	26.4% (137)	36.7% (149)	39.5% (58)	31.8% (55)	33.3% (15)	32.1% (414)

Overall, we found that respondents were uncertain about whether civil partnership was inferior to marriage, but reported that as long as the legal rights and responsibilities attached to civil partnership were different from marriage civil partnership would not represent equality.

Relationships between societal change, change in the ‘hearts and minds’ of individuals and media representation are, of course, highly complex. However, while clear structural inequality remains everyday, mundane manifestations of heterosexism which damage all our communities, families and children will endure.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

About the author

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<http://www1.aston.ac.uk/lhs/staff/az-index/peelea/>

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